

“What the Cross Reveals”
Mark 15:20b-41 (NRSV)

Graham Greene, in his novel The Heart of the Matter (1948), describes his principal character, Police Lieutenant Scobie, listening in on a dispassionate conversation about the death of an acquaintance. As Lt. Scobie examines the man’s few belongings and listens to his colleagues, he says to himself quietly, **“Through two thousand years ... we have discussed Christ’s agony in just this disinterested way”** (p. 211).

Greene is right. **It’s so easy to become desensitized to reality.** Daily we view scenes of real violence, right in our own neighbourhood, as we munch on supper, watching the early evening TV news. Crosses and crucifixion are so much a part of the landscape we do not even see them, much less are moved by them.

As Christians we must steel ourselves against such desensitization. During Holy Week and especially on Good Friday we must remember that **our Lord’s passion was real.** Granted, we need not be overcome by a morbid preoccupation with the gore of Golgotha. But at the same time, Jesus Christ’s agony must never become a matter of dispassionate interest. Further, his physical sufferings, crucifixion and death have always been and will always be the window through which we see God’s heart. This is what I hope you will see as you consider with me “What the Cross Reveals.”

Martin Hengel, the celebrated German New Testament scholar, in his great work on the crucifixion ends with these words, “Reflection on the harsh reality of the crucifixion in antiquity may help us overcome the acute loss of reality which is to be found so often in present theology and preaching” (1978, p. 90).

Certainly, Christ suffered greatly in the events leading up to and during the actual crucifixion event itself. Anyone who has read the Passion narrative in the gospels, even in a cursory way, or seen **Mel Gibson’s** powerful, yet controversial film, **The Passion**, ought to know that. In Gethsemane our Lord almost expired as he gazed with horror into the cup he had to drink (14:36). **He was struck** in Caiaphas’ presence as he was subjected to a series of blows while the temple guards blindfolded him. **They taunted him** to identify them as they passed by, spitting upon him and striking him in the face (15:65).

Next he was scourged under Pilate’s custody. Scourging, nicknamed “the halfway death” by the Romans, meant they stripped him naked and tied him down, and used the deadly “flagellum” whip to rip skin from his body. In their presentation of the “Comic King,” **they robed him** in a short cloak as a calculated affront to Jewish modesty; **they “crowned” him** with thorns; and **they beat him** with a mock scepter until he was unrecognizable (15:20a). It was likely after that that Pilate presented him to the people saying, “Ecce homo!” – “Behold, the Man!” (15:6-12). The crowd repeatedly cried out, “Crucify him!” “Crucify him!” (15:13-14). Soon after, Jesus Christ began his journey to Golgotha, the nearest place of execution just outside the city walls. “Then,” writes Mark, **“they led him out to crucify him”** (15:20b).

Let us behold the incarnation and the extent of God’s love for us.

1. **The cross reveals God’s love** (Mk. 15:20b-24).

Jesus Christ’s final road to the cross began with his **“Via Dolorosa”** – the “Road of Sorrows.” The details are mercifully brief. **“They compelled a passerby, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross;** it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus. Then they brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means the place of the skull)” (15:21-22). Now whether it was a place where the topography looked like a skull or whether this was a place where one found the skulls of those who had died, I don’t know.

Mark’s Gospel, like the other gospels, tells us very little about this and other details about **the crucifixion**, because **everyone in the Roman Empire knew the gruesome details all too well**. Such executions and the death marches that preceded them were as common as today’s funeral processions.

Ancient history fills out the details. Jesus was placed in the centre of a company of four Roman soldiers. The **cross beam of the cross**, quite heavy in itself, was placed on his bruised shoulders and upper back. The fourth-century bishop of Constantinople, an eloquent preacher, **Chrysostom**, saw prophetic fulfillment in this, seeing it as a parallel to Isaac’s bearing the wood for his own sacrifice on Mount Moriah (Homily LXXXV.1). As **Jesus stumbled along the narrow Jerusalem city streets** to the place of his execution, an officer preceded him carrying a **wooden placard** completely whitened with chalk and bearing the darkened inscription of

Jesus' crime: "JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS" (Mk. 11: 26; Jn. 19:19; William L. Lane, p. 557).

An innocent **bystander**, judging by his name, **Simon**, a diaspora Jew from Cyrene in North Africa, was on his way into Jerusalem for the Passover festivities, and he was compelled to bear Jesus' cross beam. The heavy weight had probably been too much for Jesus, weakened as he was. Certainly it wouldn't have been Simon's idea of how to celebrate Passover, but there is some evidence to show that this unusual and moving experience opened the way for **God's love and grace** to come into his life and that of his family (Rom. 16:13; Acts 13:1).

When they came to Golgotha, Simon would have thrown the cross beam to the ground in disgust. Did he stay to watch what happened next? We do not know. **I am sure that watching how Jesus handled himself must have touched his heart.** Some people offered Jesus "**wine mixed with myrrh**" as a sedative; "**but he did not take it**" (15:23). Perhaps Jesus rejected any form of relief for his sufferings because he wanted to maintain clarity of mind to the end, bearing the full weight of his suffering on our behalf. He even maintained his lucidity enough to **minister lovingly** to the dying thief (15:27) and to pronounce his wondrous seven "last words."

Then Jesus was thrown upon **the rough wood of the cross beam**, his hands were stretched out to its opposite ends, ironically, as if they now seemed to offer **a wide and loving embrace to the whole world**, and spikes were driven through his hands, near his wrist bones, so he couldn't tear them away. The cross beam was raised by the four soldiers with Jesus dangling from it and fastened to **a standing post**. Then Jesus' feet were nailed, probably with a single spike, to the post (15:24a). Jesus began his repeated genuflections as he struggled for breath and folded his head sideways or downwards, again and again, in exhaustion.

This was **the lowest form of degradation** a person could experience. As a result, Roman citizens of the time refrained as much as possible from ever mentioning the word "cross" (Cicero, Pro Rabiro, V.16). Jesus' Jewish antagonists would also have well remembered Deuteronomy 21:23: "Anyone who is hung on a tree is accursed" and some gleefully misapplied it to Jesus. This was **the lowest rung in our Lord's humiliation**. An early Christian hymn, quoted by the apostle Paul in his letter to the Philippians, declared, "[He] emptied himself, taking the form of a slave. And being

found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death -- even death upon a cross” (Php. 2:7-8).

In the manner of his death especially, Jesus Christ was “**a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles**” (1 Cor. 1:23). To Jews and to Romans and Greeks alike, it was madness to suppose that anyone crucified would pretend to be God (Hengel, p. 83). But he was and is; and Jesus Christ did it all because of the love that God has for us.

Although not stated overtly here, **the cross reveals the love of God as nothing else in the universe could**. We must weave this truth into the very fibre of our consciousness for our soul’s salvation and health: “... in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself” (2 Cor. 5:19a). Moreover, we must never fall into the delusion of thinking that the suffering was not as great for him because of the fact that he was God. He did it as a man among men, in total and in exemplary dependence upon the Father. His pain was alleviated by nothing. If anything, it was heightened by his deep awareness of what he was doing. And he did it all for love of us.

Fellow-believers, the cross is the one place where sophistication and emotional detachment cannot be. **It demands our passionate return of love.**

2. **The cross also reveals Christ’s Lordship** (Mk. 15:25-26).

Jesus Christ’s persecutors may not have been aware of the love that was being declared through the cross, but they were aware of **his Lordship**. Verse 25 and 26 tell us: “It was nine o’clock in the morning when they crucified him. **The inscription of the charges against him read, ‘The King of the Jews’**” (15:25-26). John’s Gospel adds some more detail:

Pilate had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.” Many Jews read this inscription, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew [i.e., Aramaic], in Latin, and in Greek. Then the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, “Do not write, “The King of the Jews,” but “This man said, I am the King of the Jews.” Pilate answered, “What I have written, I have written.” (Jn.19:19-22).

What Pilate said could have been understood to have meant, “**What I’ve written will always remain written.**” He was unwittingly stating an **eternal truth**. During Jesus’ infancy, magi came from the East, heralding him as a king (Matt. 2:2). At the beginning of Passion Week, his adoring friends had cried, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord -- the King of Israel!” (Jn. 12:13b). Standing before Pilate earlier, Jesus had borne witness to his “kingdom [which was and] is not from this world” (Jn. 18:36-37). Now, **his royal title is fixed to his cross**, and the rulers of Israel could not get it removed.

The Aramaic, Latin and Greek language renderings of the inscription also announce that **his rule is not only regal but universal**. Jesus rules from the cross. It is no surprise, therefore, that virtually every New Testament reference to Jesus thereafter is accompanied by a reference to his cross.

Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered
To receive power and wealth and wisdom and might
And honour and glory and blessing! (Rev. 5:12)

The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord
And of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever. (Rev. 11:15b)

So, too, subsequent hymn writers speak of Jesus Christ’s kingship.

Crown him with man crowns, the Lamb upon his throne;
Hark! How the heavenly anthem drowns all music but its own!
Awake, my soul and sing of him who died for Thee,
And hail him as Thy matchless King through all eternity.

The crucifixion not only proclaims Christ’s love as nothing else can do, but it shouts **his everlasting right to rule**. So what Christ did on the cross “demands [our] soul, [our] life, [our] all.”

If you see Jesus Christ’s love, you must **hear and heed his demands**. One of the last things he said to his disciples was this: “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love” (Jn. 15:9-10). Christ on the cross is not just a prayer-meeting Jesus, nor simply a story about Jesus, but the New Testament Jesus

Christ – **God incarnate**, who came down to earth “for us and for our salvation” (The Nicene Creed). Jesus Christ wants our absolute devotion.

The crucifixion reveals Jesus Christ’s love, then his Lordship, and now his atoning work.

3. **The cross reveals Christ’s substitutionary atonement (15:27-32).**

As though the crucifixion was not enough, Jesus was the object of continuing ridicule – verbal violence.

Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, “Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself and come down from the cross!” In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes were also mocking him among themselves and saying, “he saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe.” Those who were crucified with him also taunted him (15:29-32).

There have been stories in the news of people who were trying to kill themselves and people were urging them on. There was a similar spirit in the average person who passed by Jesus. The chief priests and the teachers did the same thing – but among themselves, less they appear as crass as the mob. Jesus was also mocked by his fellow victims -- the two terrorist “bandits” – who were also crucified with him, at his right and left.

But even here was grace, as Luke’s Gospel records:

One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we have indeed been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.” Then he said, “Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom.” He replied, “Truly, I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (23:39-43).

Apart from what you may think of **deathbed conversions** – and I personally think they are valid; it’s never too late to say “yes” to God – there is

something very important here to be observed. **Jesus Christ's love extended to anyone who called upon his name.** In a few hours Jesus died (15:37). The Jews, not wanting to leave the bodies there over the Sabbath, asked the soldiers to break the bandits legs so that they would die more quickly, no longer being able to push themselves up every few minutes on their foot pedestals into a more life-sustaining position (Jn. 19:31-33). Thus, when death came, it brought eternal death to one and eternal life to the other. Here is something of unforgettable beauty, and it is this: if the cross teaches love, then the positioning of the crosses on Calvary and Jesus' action teaches us how love goes out to anyone who will repent in this world.

Further, **it is on Jesus' say-so and it is by Jesus' own death in our place** that this happens. **Jesus is our substitute.** It is not that Jesus was guilty; he was manifestly innocent. Even a centurion standing by saw that. "Truly," he said, "This man was God's Son!" (15:39). And it is not true that the two "bandits" were guiltless; they had both committed wrong for which Rome had judged them to be worthy of death. But it is true that "one bandit's sins rested on Jesus Christ by virtue of his faith in him" (**Donald Barnhouse**). All of us, like the bandits, have sin in us. We are divided, as were they. But Christians have graciously been allowed to let the penalty of sin rest with Christ. That is what justification by faith or salvation is. Thanks be to God!

If you want your sin to be taken care of by Jesus Christ, you must **look closely at the cross.** First behold the man and his suffering. Observe how great his love for you is. Tell him you love him and appreciate his love poured out for you.

For [the Bible tells us], **while we were still weak**, at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly. God proves his love for us in that **while we were still sinners** Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him For, if **while we were enemies**, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life (Rom. 5:6, 8-10).

Second, **behold the King and his demands.** Yield to his rule. Serve him. Third, **behold the three crosses** and be thankful that he has taken care of your sins. As the apostle Peter has declared, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed" (1 Pe. 2:24).

Let us thank him with all our hearts and lives.

Amen

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